

SHARING INFORMATION ON WHATSAPP IN PANDEMIC ERA: A CASE OF COVID-19 IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Purpose: *This paper aims at investigating information sharing patterns on COVID-19 among WhatsApp users during the pandemic in Nigeria. People share and forward information, call and hold meetings using social media including WhatsApp. WhatsApp is a proprietary application that runs across various phone platforms allowing users to share or send information even during the COVID-19 pandemic.*

Design/Methodology & Approach: *Using a survey design with WhatsApp users in Nigeria being the study's population. Since the researchers could not clearly define members of the population, the snowball sampling technique was used to enumerate data from 183 WhatsApp users sampled for the study. Data was collected for three (3) weeks during the strict lockdown directive by the Federal Government of Nigeria using a validated online questionnaire developed using the google form. Data was analysed using descriptive statistics including frequencies and percentages.*

Findings: *The findings of the study showed that more than half of the respondents rated their ability to share information online. The respondents shared COVID-19 information they created on WhatsApp including those ones created by others. More than half of the respondents often received COVID-19 information on WhatsApp. Also, International Health Organizations and National Health Organizations were the most popular sources of COVID-19 information. Majority of the respondents shared information and updates or news on COVID-19,*

Implications: *WhatsApp is a popular tool among the Nigerian populace for sharing COVID-19 information. COVID-19 information providers can leverage on people's trust in the Health organizations to disseminate COVID-19 information and strategies for humanity to prevail over the virus by using WhatsApp as a veritable sharing platform using text, video and picture format.*

Originality/Value: *The originality of this work lies on the clear identification of formats, sources and types of COVID-19 information shared during in Nigeria during the pandemic.*

Paper Type: *Empirical*

Keywords: *Information Sharing, WhatsApp, COVID-19 information, Pandemics*

Introduction

Social media are digital platforms that allow users to create, interact and share information. It has changed the way people interact, communicate and share information. Its growing popularity has led to increase in volumes of digital contents and revolutionized the way people create, access and publish digital contents or information. Mefolere (2016) noted that social media have the capability to educate, entertain, inform and influence its audience. People share and forward information, call and hold meetings using social media; the popularity

of social media including WhatsApp as a means for sharing information is as a result of wide user base and the rapid spread of information it affords to subscribed users (Osatuyi, 2013). WhatsApp is a social networking platform with an instant messaging capability invented in 2009 by Brian Acton and Jan Koum that provides users with messaging and Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) services available on Mobile app stores at no monetary cost (Purkayastha and Chanda, 2018). WhatsApp is presently a subsidiary of Facebook, Inc., California, USA. It is a platform

that allows users to send instant text messages, audios, videos, images, and document files. The choice to WhatsApp as a tool or platform for sharing of COVID-19 is as a result of its growing popularity among social media users especially in Africa. In 2019, WhatsApp is said to have over 1.5 billion monthly active users (Statista, 2020). This highlights the popularity of WhatsApp for sharing information. Statista (2020) reported that as of January 2020, the five most popular social networks worldwide ranked by number of active users in descending order are Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger and WeChat. This put WhatsApp as the 3rd most popular social network platform. According to Digital News Reports (2019), WhatsApp is a primary network for discussing and sharing news in non-western countries like Brazil (53%) Malaysia (50%), and South Africa (49%). This is a reality in Nigeria as WhatsApp is mostly used for sharing information and news among Nigerians. Similarly, in 2020 the use of online and social media substantially increased and WhatsApp saw the biggest growth in general with many using it to connect to group, share information, or take part in a local support network (Digital News Reports, 2020). This reality is traceable to the need to do most activities online including sourcing and sharing news due to the outbreak of Coronavirus disease (COVID-19).

COVID-19 is a disease caused by a new strain of coronavirus. 'CO' stands for corona, 'VI' for virus, and 'D' for disease and linked to the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) that causes illness ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases (WHO, 2020a). The first human cases of the disease were first reported in Wuhan City, China, in December 2019. The first confirmed case of the coronavirus disease in Nigeria was in February 2020. In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced COVID-19 as a global pandemic. The disease has continued to ravage the world spreading to 216 countries, areas or territories recording over 21,000,000 confirmed cases and

close to 800, 000 deaths across the world in August 2020. (WHO, 2020b). This has given rise to the need to share information on COVID-19 so people can be informed and keep safe. Information sharing can either be sharing self - created or those created by others. Similarly, to contain this disease, various health organizations (international and national), government, media and other stakeholders have developed strategies ranging from hygiene programs, awareness campaign, strengthen the healthcare service or system, lockdown directives, trainings, expert deployment in various parts of the world for research and development on COVID-19 prevention, spread, transmissibility, severity and treatment.

Consequently, people have engaged in searching and sharing information on COVID-19 disease relating to its prevention, spread, transmissibility, severity and treatment. Just as the name implies, COVID-19 prevention information bothers on preventive measures or practices to ensure that people do not become carries of the virus. Spread and transmissibility on the other hand are information on presence of this disease in various parts of the world and how this virus can be transmitted from person to person and within the community. Lastly, severity and treatment are information on how critical the disease is in the countries, causes and treatment that relate to ways of treating or curbing the disease.

The various types of COVID-19 information being shared could either be those created by individuals or created by others. The Digital News Report (2020) noted that people trust COVID-19 information from the Media twice more than the level of trust for social networks, video platforms, or messaging services. This implies that individuals search and share COVID-19 information on social media platforms including WhatsApp. During the pandemic, WhatsApp reported a significant increase in the amount of information forwarding which can be overwhelming for users and can contribute to

the spread of misinformation thereby limiting messages forwarding among users (Punch 2020). Therefore, this study investigated types, sources and COVID-19 information sharing pattern among WhatsApp users in Nigeria.

Research Questions

The study investigated COVID-19 information sharing pattern among WhatsApp users in Nigeria. To attain the study's objective we sought answers to the following research questions:

- i. how often do WhatsApp users share COVID-19 information on the platform?
- ii. what are the sources of COVID-19 information that users share on WhatsApp?
- iii. what are the formats of information users share on WhatsApp?
- iv. what are the types of COVID-19 information shared on WhatsApp?

Literature Review

The increasing spread of messaging apps now make social communication especially those relating to news become more private and people are spending more time with WhatsApp and Instagram (Digital News Report, 2019). A study by Chen and Sakamoto (2013) examined sharing crisis information in social media when a user takes perspective of self-versus others. It was found that when individuals imagine themselves in a disaster centre, it increased the likelihood to share crisis information relative to imagining another person in the disaster zone or centre. Also, they found that when information is associated with negative feelings, such as worry or fear, it is more likely to be shared but when information is perceived confusing or uninteresting, it is less likely to be shared. This means that during a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, people share information when they imagine themselves been directly affected suggesting that there is high likelihood that COVID-19 information will be shared online.

Digital News Report (2020) reports surveys of six (6) countries before and after the pandemic had

taken effect and found that the Coronavirus crisis has substantially increased news consumption for mainstream media with television and online sources experiencing significant increase in use and television being the main source of COVID-19 information. The study also noted the accelerating shift to an all-digital future. Chen, Liang and Cai (2018) surveyed 365 WeChat user to enquire of their motivations for sharing information during crisis with the aim of proposing a conceptual model. From this study, it was found that participants share social crisis information not for entertainment but for obtaining information from others' comments, socializing with others, or simply completing their social media routines. This implies that people share information on social media especially during crisis or disaster.

Rovetta and Bhagavathula, (2020) conducted a study to investigate COVID-19 related web search behaviours and infodemic attitudes in Italy using Google Trends and found that queries searched related to COVID-19 symptoms, disinfectants, masks, and vaccines were relatively high at the initial break out of the disease in Italy, stabilized for a period but quickly increased as the number of cases increased in Italy. Implying that people searched for necessary personal protection and hygiene practices as COVID-19 cases rose in Italy. In Africa, a study on Coronavirus related online web search conducted in Ethiopia using Google trend found that in the participants search activities, updates related issues were the most commonly trending health related searches on Google followed by mortality and symptoms related issues (Terefe, Rovetta, Rjan and Awoke, 2020).

Methodology

The study adopted a survey design. The study's population comprised WhatsApp users. Since the researchers could not clearly define members of the population, the snowball sampling technique was used to enumerate data from 183 WhatsApp users sampled for the study. Data was collected for three (3) weeks during the strict lockdown directive by the Federal Government of Nigeria

using a validated online questionnaire developed using the google form. Data was analysed using descriptive statistics including frequency and percentage

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study. First, the study sought information on the online information search skills of respondent before

How would you describe your ability to search online
183 responses

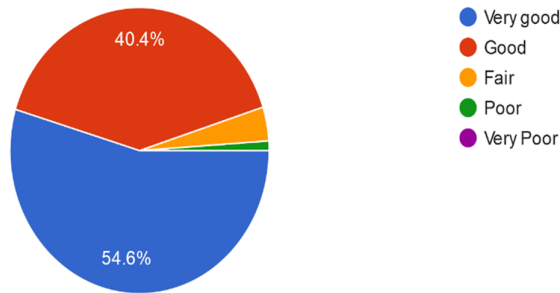


Figure1: Online search skills of respondents

From Figure 1, more than half (54.6%) of the respondents rated their ability to search online as very good and 40.4% as good with only about 2 % rating their online search skill as poor. This implies that more than 90% of the WhatsApp users that participated in this study possess needed online search skills.

Presentation and Discussion of Research Questions

This section presents and discuss the findings of this study based on the afore stated research questions

addressing the afore stated research objectives/questions.

Online information Searching Skills of Respondents

This section sought to understand the online searching skills of the respondents by asking them to rate their online searching skills.

Research question 1: how often do WhatsApp users share COVID-19 information on the platform?

In order to attain this research question, sharing of COVID-19 information was measured from two perspectives, sharing COVID-19 information created by the respondents or those created by others. Also respondents were also asked about the receipt of COVID-19 information from other WhatsApp users. This is because a sharing cycle is complete only when the shared information is received by the recipient.

Sharing COVID-19 information created by you on WhatsApp
N=174

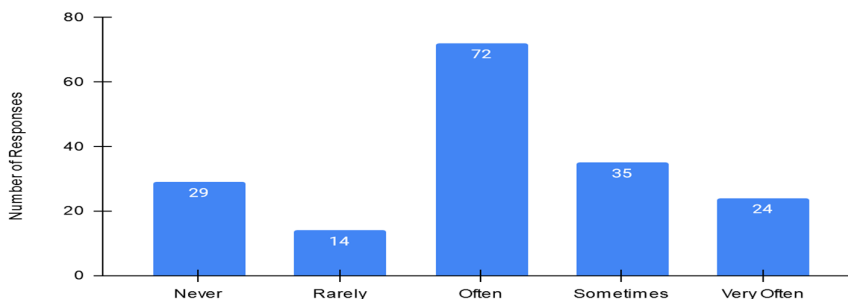


Figure 2a: Sharing COVID-19 information created by self

Sharing COVID-19 information created by others on WhatsApp
N=178

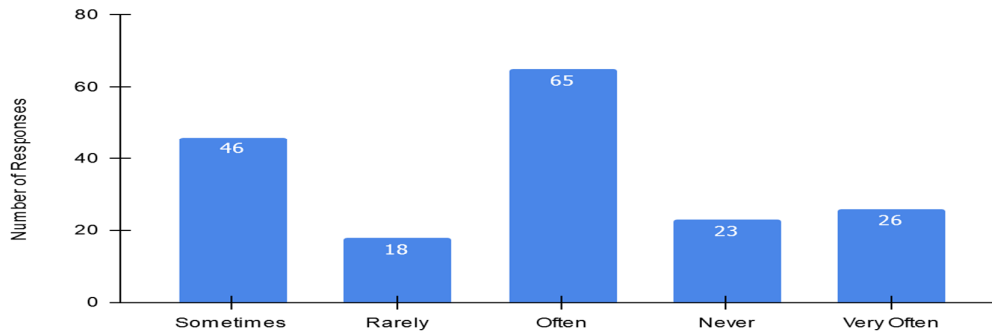


Figure 2b: Sharing COVID-19 information created by others

Receipt of COVID-19 information on WhatsApp

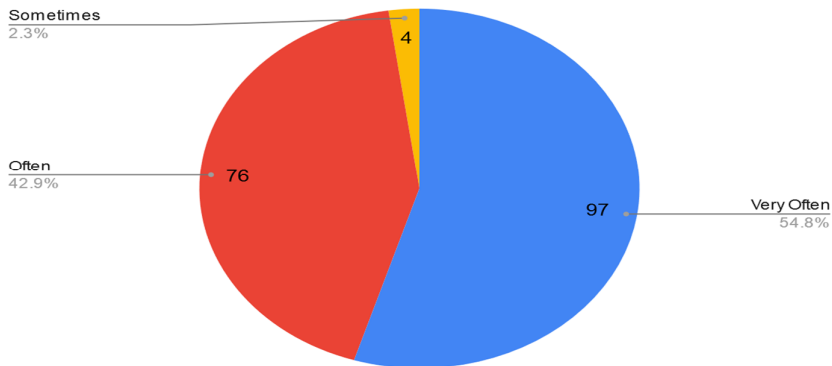


Figure 2c: Receipt of COVID-19 information on WhatsApp

From figure 2 a and b, 39.3% and 35.5% of WhatsApp users often share COVID- 19 information created by themselves and others respectively. This means that during the COVID-19 crisis or pandemic many users shared information relating to pandemic on WhatsApp. However, many shared COVID-19 information created by themselves more often than those created by others. Also, it can be observed from Figure 2 a and b that sometimes respondents share COVID-19 information created by others than those created by themselves. Further, figure 2c revealed that 54.8% and 42.9% of the respondents received COVID-19 information very often and often respectively. This confirms the findings of Chen and Sakamoto (2013) who found in their study the increased likelihood to

share crisis information when people perceive themselves to be in a disaster zone or centre. It also corroborate the findings of Chen, Liang and Cai (2018) who found out that people share crisis information on social media not for entertainment but for obtaining information from others and socializing that is keeping in touch with members of their social circle during crisis.

Research Question two: What are the sources of COVID-19 information that users share on WhatsApp

In order to answer this question respondents were asked to select as many that applies from a list of sources where they obtain COVID-19 information from.

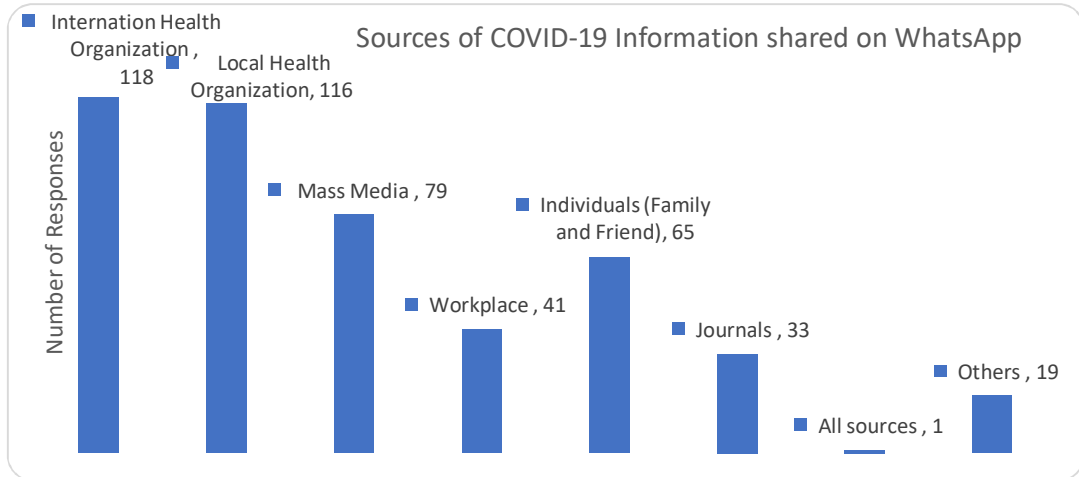


Figure 3: Sources of COVID-19 information

From Figure 3, about 2/3rd (64.4%) of the respondents agreed that International Health Organizations such as WHO is a main source for COVID-19 information shared with other WhatsApp users. Similar 63.3% of the respondents reported that Local Health Organization such as the CDC is a major source of COVID-19 information. Further, near half of the sample 43.1% and 35.5% reported Mass media and individuals as sources of COVID-19 information respectively. Journals (18%). On the other hand was the least consulted source of COVID-19 information among the sampled WhatsApp users. This observable trend is

consistent with the findings of Digital News Report 2020 which reported increased news consumption for mainstream media with television and online sources experiencing significant increase in use and television being the main source of COVID-19 information.

Research Question Three: What format of COVID-19 information do users share on WhatsApp

In order to answer this question, respondents were asked to select as many that applies from a list of formats of COVID-19 information they share on WhatsApp

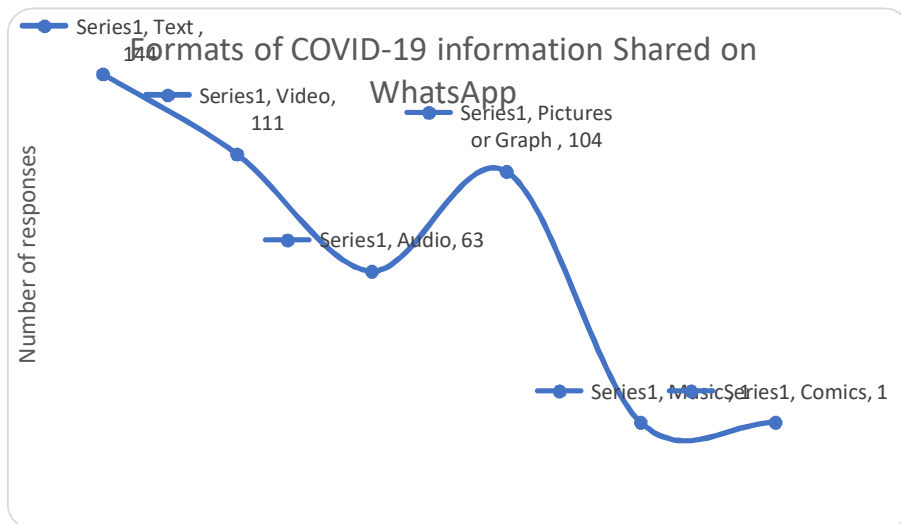


Figure 4: Formats of COVID-19 Information

From Figure 4, many (78.6%) of the respondents reported that they share COVID-19 information in form of text than any other format. Also, more than half 60.6% and 56.8% noted they share COVID-19 information in Video and Picture or Graphics format. Music and Comics on the other hand were the least format of COVID-19 information shared among the WhatsApp users. This implies that information professionals or

providers can leverage on multimedia information including text, videos, pictures and graphics.

Research Question 4: What are the types of COVID-19 information shared on WhatsApp

In order to answer this question, respondents were asked to select as many that applies from a list of types of COVID-19 information they share on WhatsApp

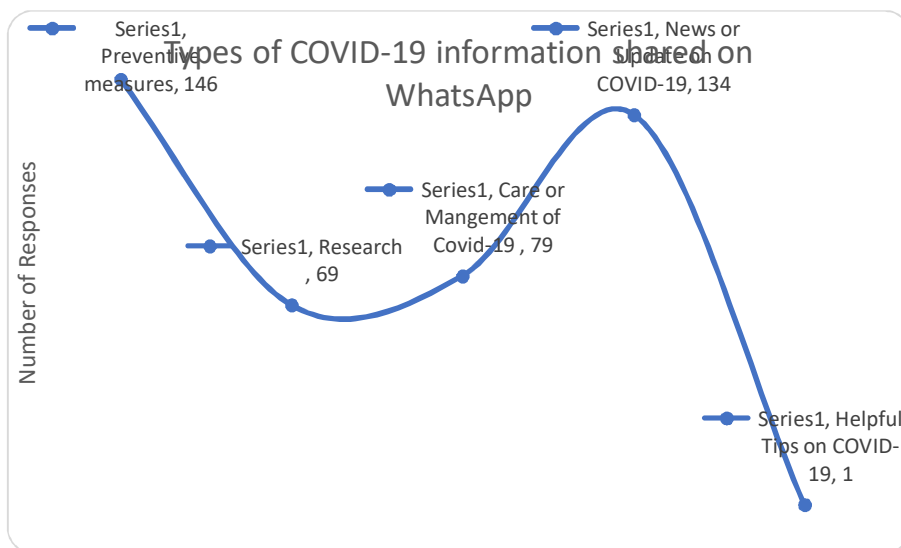


Figure 5: Types of COVID-19 Information

From figure 5, 79.8% and 73.2% of the respondents reported that they share information on preventive measures and News of Updates on Covid-19 on WhatsApp. The least shared type of information was research (37.7%) and helpful tips (0.5%). The observable trend may be as a result of the need for participants to search and share information about the disease with family and friends via WhatsApp so they will understand the disease and how avoid it especially at a time when COVID-19 just broke out in Nigeria. This is consistent with the findings of Rovetta and Bhagavathula, (2020) who reported that people searched for necessary information about personal protection and hygiene practices as COVID-19 cases rose in Italy and that of Terefe, Rovetta, Rjan and Awoke (2020) who found updates related issues were the most commonly trending health related searches on Google in Ethiopia.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It is of no doubt that people especially during crisis such as the Coronavirus pandemic search and share information on social media including WhatsApp. WhatsApp is undoubtedly a popular platform where study’s participants share and received information on COVID-19. The use of social media such as WhatsApp is necessary to communicate or educate the masses. Evidently, participant trust COVID-19 information sourced from the health organizations both internationally and nationally and growing trust for information from the Mass media. Therefore, these organizations can leverage on the trust of the populace to disseminate strategies, expectations and actions on how humanity can prevail over the virus. However, the study recommends that COVID-19 information providers can leverage on WhatsApp for sharing COVID-19 information by providing text, video

and picture-based information. Also, they should provide preventive and news or updates on the Virus via WhatsApp to reach larger audience.

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